

Listen To Your Body Talking

When you are sitting, you may feel relaxed, but your back muscles are actually hard at work. The farther you lean forward, the tenser they get. If you work at a desk, you can save your back from strain by sitting squarely against your backrest or by leaning forward and supporting your head in the palm of your hand.

According to an article by Mirva Veijalainen that appeared in *Work Health Safety 2000*, published by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, you should build short breaks into your daily routine. Rock yourself forward and back; put your feet up on your desk; or get up and walk around. When you're on the phone, stand up and stretch. The best way to beat muscle strain is to vary your posture and stay on the move. It's better to shift yourself from one bad posture to another than to stay fixed in the same position all day long.

The article states medical experts agree that sitting is bad for us. The best way to stave off pain in the back, neck and shoulders is to exercise regularly or to sit in a comfortable, well-supported position, allowing your circulation to flow freely, pumping blood and nutrients into your tissues.

Everyone should learn to listen to the signs their body is sending them, advises the article. Pause and consider whether your muscles are feeling tense or relaxed. When you learn to read the signs, you will know what to do before real symptoms of fatigue set in: Vary your posture, change position, or get up and walk around.

"Office workers don't have to stay chained to their seats all day long. All it takes is a bit of movement and motivation to prevent muscle strain. Moving around also improves alertness and productivity," says Ritva Kukkonen, an occupational physiotherapist at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health.

Regular exercise and stretching breaks at work help improve muscle control and coordination. But, even if you visit a gym regularly, you need to know that lifting weights is no safeguard against the neck and shoulder pain that comes from tensing your muscles at the office—strength alone will not prevent muscle strain.

Kukkonen teaches "sitting exercises" at plants in Finland. Employees bring their office chairs to these sessions and literally relearn how to sit properly.

"Only by listening to your body will you learn the ergonomic positions that are right for you," says Kukkonen. ■

